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Wilson, Erin K.

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‘Power Differences’ and ‘the Power of Difference’: The Dominance of Secularism as Ontological Injustice

ERIN K. WILSON

University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

ABSTRACT *Recent religious studies and international relations scholarship has highlighted secularism as a critical element in dominant modes of identity, power, and exclusion in global politics. Yet, the implications of these insights for global justice theory and practice have rarely been considered. This article suggests that the current dominance of secularism within global justice theory and practice risks undermining the global justice project. Specifically, I argue that secularism’s dominance constitutes an ontological injustice, where both alternative non-secular visions of the world and visions of alternative non-secular worlds are subordinated to secular ontologies. However, this argument raises a crucial question: if, despite secularism’s claim to neutrality and universality, the dominance of secular ontologies contributes to rather than ameliorates injustice, the question that remains is: what are the alternatives? The article concludes by exploring some preliminary responses to this question.*

Keywords: secularism, religion, cultural anthropology, ontologies, global justice

Introduction

Recent religious studies and international relations (IR) scholarship has questioned the applicability of secularism as an analytical and policy framework in global politics (Asad, 2003; Casanova, 2011; Gutkowski, 2014; Hurd, 2008; Lynch, 2011; Mavelli, 2012; Wilson, 2012). This scholarship has argued not only that secularism is a critical structuring element in prevailing modes of identity, power, and exclusion (Gutkowski, 2014; Hurd, 2008), but also that it prescribes a particular understanding of what ‘religion’ is—something clearly identifiable and distinguishable from other domains of human activity, private, individual, and largely irrational, or at least non-rational—ignoring or marginalizing alternative conceptualizations (Asad, 2003).

Correspondence Address: Erin K. Wilson, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 38, 9712GK Groningen, Netherlands. Email: e.k.wilson@rug.nl

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Global justice theorists and practitioners have been slow to acknowledge secularism's dominance and its implications for the pursuit of global justice. By 'global justice theorists', I refer to philosophers, economists, political theorists, and ethicists exploring questions of justice across state borders. By 'global justice practitioners' I mean the vast array of organizations and movements concerned with economic inequality, food insecurity, indigenous rights, climate change, human rights, amongst others. Daulatzai (2004) argues that the dominance of a 'particular secularistic vocabulary, grammar and culture' at the World Social Forum (WSF), a pivotal site of the global justice movement (GJM), limits possibilities for developing alternative forms of anti-imperial dissent, producing forms of politics that are exclusionary towards religious actors in a space otherwise celebrated for its tolerance and diversity. Similarly, Conway (2013) suggests that secularism's prevalence amongst key actors in the GJM, especially the WSF, contributes to pushing already marginalized perspectives of indigenous communities further to the periphery by ignoring or devaluing their cosmologies.

Such a situation is, I argue, antithetical to the commitments and goals of global justice theory and practice. By employing predominantly secular modern political traditions, such as liberalism and socialism, global justice actors arguably undermine the pursuit of greater global material equality by marginalizing religious and indigenous perspectives on how core global justice issues should be responded to, but also how such issues should be identified in the first place (Conway, 2013; Daulatzai, 2004). It contributes to what De Sousa Santos (2005, 2014) has called 'epistemological or cognitive injustice', subordinating 'alternative views of the world'—forms of knowledge and evidence different from scientific rationalist knowledge that is privileged in Euro-American perspectives. In addition, however, I suggest that the dominance of secularism in global justice theory and practice constitutes a form of injustice previously under-explored—*ontological injustice*, the subordination and exclusion not just of 'alternative views of the world', but 'views of alternative worlds' (Viveiros de Castro, 2013).

All three forms of injustice—material, epistemological, and ontological—are entangled and contribute to inequalities in contemporary approaches to global justice. Global justice theory and practice have to date primarily focused on material and, more recently, epistemological injustices, material injustice being concerned with the distribution of resources and opportunities (Steger, Goodman, & Wilson, 2013), while epistemological injustice focuses on forms of knowledge, frameworks for analysis and types of evidence considered 'acceptable' or 'reliable' in global justice (Bennett, 2007; De Sousa Santos, 2014). In both instances, there is an assumption that a single reality exists, and the disagreements that arise surrounding global justice theory and practice are the result of conflicts over how to interpret that reality. I argue, however, that if we are to pursue a truly just global community, we must also address ontological injustices, that is the devaluing and exclusion of different 'theories and understandings about what exists' (Pedersen, 2001, p. 413).

As theories about what exists, ontologies possess specific assumptions about the world, human beings, their relationship to one another, to nature, to the supernatural (if it exists), and to themselves (Viveiros de Castro, 2013). These assumptions are contextually specific, and do not necessarily make sense from one context to another. While this has long been recognized about 'religious' or spiritual ontologies, secular ontologies retain their claim to universality and continue to position themselves as superior to non-secular ontologies. Destabilizing secular ontologies, concerned with the immanent and material, and particularly their division of the world into unstable categories of 'religious' and 'secular' is a crucial part of addressing existing epistemological and ontological injustices in global justice theory and practice.

I begin with an overview of emerging literature on secularism's dominance and the effects of this on global justice. I then develop the concept of ontological injustice, drawing on the recent 'ontological turn' in cultural anthropology. Cultural anthropology has been described as 'the science of the ontological self-determination of the world's peoples' (Viveiros de Castro 2009, cited in Holbraad, Pedersen, & Viveiros de Castro, 2014), a science committed to recognizing, understanding, and honouring alternative views of the world and views of alternative worlds, not just studying them as quaint and somewhat primordial precursors to secular modernity. This commitment is consistent with the goals of global justice actors (Bello, 1999; De Sousa Santos, 2005, 2014; George, 2004; Tarrow, 2005), suggesting that useful synergies may be found across the two disciplines. Following this, I highlight ways in which secularism may be considered a distinct ontology that dominates global justice theory and practice, contributing to the marginalization and exclusion of views of alternative non-secular worlds. I conclude by exploring possibilities for addressing the ontological injustice of secularism's dominance. This is not to replace or destroy secularism, but rather encourage alternative modes of interaction across ontologies that do not privilege secular ways of being and knowing and exclude non-secular voices and perspectives.

Secularism and Its Discontents

Secularism has arguably been the dominant model for liberal statecraft and a powerful worldview/ideology structuring Euro-American political communities since the Enlightenment. A key distinction is that secularism as worldview or ideology makes normative assumptions about the value of the 'religious' and the 'secular', whereas secularism as statecraft is concerned with laws and institutions that manage relationships between religious and secular authorities and domains (Casanova, 2011). While the two do not necessarily overlap in theory, in practice, secular statecraft is frequently underpinned by variations of secular ideology (Casanova, 2011). Given that this article is concerned with global justice theory and practice, phenomena that transcend the boundaries and institutions of the state, I focus on worldview/ideological secularism, rather than secularism as statecraft.

The term 'secularism' has been traced back to 1850s England, first articulated by George Holyoake, and emerging out of ideas of 'the secular' and 'the religious' (Asad, 2003; Weir, 2015). The distinction between the secular and the religious originally emerged as a theological one, but has since become more widely acknowledged (Casanova, 2011), most notably, Weir (2015, p. 11) suggests, in 1840s England amidst a debate over national primary education. Worldview/ideological secularism was positioned as 'one competing creed' amongst others, though its association with science, governed by reason, rationality, and neutrality, gave it an advantage in the education debate (Weir, 2015, pp. 11–13). Even this early in its conceptual career, multiple and competing assumptions were associated with ideological secularism. Some variants of worldview secularism were (and are) sympathetic to, even protective of religion (Kmieć, 2015, p. 41; Stepan, 2012), while others were (and are) openly hostile and anti-religious (Hurd, 2008; Kuru, 2007). Both types, however, assume that secularism provides the best possibility for neutral and equitable public debate, as opposed to religious worldviews. It is this assumption that contributes to the entanglement of secularism with liberal political philosophy and the pursuit of public reason (for detailed discussions of this relationship, see Eberle, 2002; Habermas, 2006; Rawls, 1999; Wilson, 2012).

Since the early 2000s, scholars in religious studies, philosophy and IR have argued that no version of secularism provides a neutral, universal basis for public reason, contrary to long-

held liberal assumptions (Casanova, 2011; Connolly, 1999; Eberle, 2002; Hurd, 2008; Kuru, 2007; Mavelli, 2012; Taylor, 2009; Wilson, 2012). Rather, secularism represents 'fundamental shifts in conceptions of self, time, space, ethics, and morality' (Mahmood, 2016, p. 3). Secularism is a highly specific, culturally embedded model for managing the relationship between religion and politics that emerged in Euro-American contexts as part of the Enlightenment, but which has become influential across diverse regions of the world (Gutkowski, 2014, p. 6). In other words, secularism is a distinctive ontology, or theory about what exists (Pedersen, 2001, p. 413). It 'redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion' (Asad, 2003, pp. 21–22); constitutes particular practices and ideas along the natural/supernatural binary, positioning some practices within the category of the natural or the secular, while others are placed in the category of the supernatural—religion, superstition or fetishism. Furthermore, secularism attributes particular characteristics to these practices—irrational, violent, chaotic, and divisive (Wilson, 2012). These inherent assumptions have come to dominate how we analyse practices constructed as 'religious' and how they intersect with and affect politics and public life. Secularism's origins within the Euro-American context contribute to its association with colonialism and binary oppositions between not only 'secular' and 'religious', but also 'modern/primitive', 'reason/emotion' and 'Western/non-Western' (Wilson, 2012) that continue to affect power relations in global politics.

This is not to suggest that secularism is monolithic, homogenous or exclusively 'Western'. Like 'religion', 'secularism' is not a singular entity. It is diverse, shifting, changing, unstable, and contextually specific (Daulatzai, 2004, p. 567). Indeed, while secularism emerged from local contexts and historical trajectories in Europe and the US, through globalization, it has merged to constitute a globalized agglomeration of ideas and practices that vary locally.¹ What secularism means in the Netherlands, for example, is very different from what it means in India, Bangladesh, France, Canada, and so on (Hurd, 2008; Kuru, 2007). Consequently, I adopt a constructivist understanding of secularism as a category that is defined in different ways in different contexts according to particular perspectives and agendas (Cavanaugh, 2009).

At the same time, while secularism does not mean the same thing from one place to the next, there are certain 'family resemblances' that characterize ideological forms of secularism across their different manifestations. These family resemblances, I argue, exist in the following basic assumptions:

- (a) 'religion' is something tangible and identifiable, that *can* be clearly distinguished, defined and separated from the 'secular', which can also be clearly defined. Not only that but
- (b) 'religion' *should* be clearly distinguished and separated from other areas of human activity, such as politics, economics, law, education and so forth, that are grouped under the 'secular' (Asad, 2002, p. 116), because
- (c) 'religion' is subjective, particular, individual and irrational (Hurd, 2008; Wilson, 2012), as opposed to the 'secular' which is neutral and universal; and
- (d) 'religion' is what people disagree about more frequently and violently than anything else (Cavanaugh, 2009), thus 'religion' is the fundamental cause of violence, intolerance and chaos; therefore
- (e) 'religion' must be kept out of the 'public' sphere and relegated to the 'private' to preserve order and peace (Taylor, 2009; Wilson, 2012), meaning that the distinction between 'religion' and the 'secular' is managed through the existence of 'public' and 'private' spheres (that are equally as unstable and problematic as categories of 'religion' and 'secular'). Finally,

- (f) ‘religion’ is always subordinated to the ‘secular’, in that, even if ‘religion’ is viewed as something that can positively contribute to politics and public life, its interventions should still be regulated by so-called *secular* authorities and institutions.

These six assumptions constitute what I shall refer to as the secular/religious binary, which is, I suggest, the essential defining feature of secular ontologies.

It is important to stress that critics of secularism are not arguing that it should be dispensed with, nor are they unconscious of the many important achievements that secularism has enabled. Secular approaches to public life are bound up with questions of justice and equality. As Mahmood (2016, p. 21) notes: ‘To critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analysing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future.’ Critiques of secularism are an attempt to recognize the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of secularism, so as to contribute to the development of alternative, more inclusive futures.

Secularism in Global Justice Theory and Practice

The discussions raised by critiques of secularism reflect and are entangled with debates in global justice theory and practice. While there are many approaches to global justice, they can be crudely categorized into either cosmopolitan or communitarian positions (Nagel, 2005). Tensions between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism generally concern whether it is possible to have a universal standard of justice or whether justice can only be developed within specific national, cultural, historical, and political contexts. This mirrors the tension between ‘secularism’ and ‘religion’ within the religious/secular binary, where secularism claims to be universal in contrast to ‘religion’, which is constructed as highly specific. Global justice practitioners have resolved this tension in relation to justice in part by adopting a hybrid approach, with a universal commitment to strengthening local autonomy and emancipation (Steger et al., 2013). This hybrid approach has yet to be adequately theorized. A focus on ontologies can assist in this endeavour, since it upholds an overarching commitment to understanding ontologies, world-views and values in their contexts (Blaser, 2013, p. 552).

On questions of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’, global justice theorists generally fall into one of three approaches. The first and most common approach is to simply ignore ‘religion’ (see, for example, O’Neill, 2000; Sen, 2008). As highlighted above (assumption (f)), the secular/religious binary contains an inherent hierarchy whereby the secular is privileged over and above the religious (Wilson, 2012). This subordination of the ‘religious’ to the ‘secular’ resulted in Euro-American politics and scholarship ignoring ‘religion’, or viewing it as an antiquated relic, only relevant when analysing ‘pre-modern’ societies (Berger, 1967, 1999; Hurd, 2015).

The other two approaches to ‘religion’ in global justice often fall into the pattern of what Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015) has referred to as the ‘Two Faces of Faith Approach’. With the end of the Cold War and particularly after 9/11, ‘religion’ made a comeback. No longer ignored, ‘religion’ is increasingly becoming an object of focus and engagement. This ‘return of religion’ is characterized by an approach where ‘religion’ is either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, containing both positive and negative elements that can be harnessed for the pursuit of human rights, democracy, equality, and justice or for oppression, discrimination, authoritarianism, violence, and terrorism. Within global justice, this results in scholars either arguing for the historical significance of religion in the development of contemporary global justice theory, pointing to predecessors such as Aquinas and St Augustine (Cahill, 2006; Carlson, 2003; MacIntyre, 1988), as well as its

significance in contemporary settings (Wolin, 2005), or emphasizing religion's volatility and unpredictability, its capacity to generate conflict, violence and inequality, leading to the conclusion that it must therefore be excluded from global justice (Hauser & Singer, 2005/2006). According to the Two Faces of Faith Approach, the task for academics, policy-makers, and practitioners is to figure out how to promote the positive aspects of 'religion', while limiting the influence of its negative dimensions.

Yet, despite apparently bringing 'religion' in from the margins, the Two Faces of Faith Approach continues to subordinate the 'religious' to the 'secular'. 'Religion' is judged according to the standards of the 'secular', whether it promotes or inhibits progress on human rights, development, and gender equality, for example. Furthermore, 'religion' is still deemed to be something that exists and can be easily distinguished and separated from politics, economics, culture, and society. The idea that 'religion' and 'secularism' are distinct and identifiable entities and bodies of thought remains largely unchallenged within global justice theory. Enlightenment assumptions regarding secular reason also still prevail—that 'secular' reasoning is neutral and universal, while 'religious' worldviews are partial and specific. There is little recognition that dominant ways of understanding both the 'secular' and the 'religious' in Euro-American contexts are not broadly applicable elsewhere, that concepts of 'secular' and 'religious' may not make sense in other societies, indeed that the possibility of separating what is 'religious' and where 'religious' influence begins and ends is largely a myth produced by secularism to begin with. This serves to disqualify any sort of intervention in the dominant spheres of power, authority, and influence in world politics from people who do not operate along the secular/religious binary.

There are multiple factors that contribute to the dominance of the secular/religious binary, including the global expansion of the European state-system through colonialism (Gutkowski, 2014) and assumptions about 'religion' and its relationship with violence, intolerance, chaos, and irrationality (Cavanaugh, 2009). These assumptions justify 'religion's' exclusion in order to preserve the public sphere, where questions of justice are debated and resolved, as a realm dominated by neutrality and universally accessible public reason (Rawls, 1988; Wilson, 2012). 'Neutrality', 'reason', and 'rationality' are fundamental components of how 'Western' scholars and policy-makers understand 'fairness', 'equality', and 'justice' (Rawls, 1988; Sen, 2010) and how issues of global injustice are approached in policy and practice (Ager & Ager, 2011, pp. 459, 461; Barnett & Stein, 2012, p. 25; Lynch, 2011). 'Secularism' is widely viewed as providing the guarantee for this neutrality (Ager & Ager, 2011, pp. 458–459; Casanova, 1994, 2011). This is why 'public reason', as articulated by John Rawls, is a hallmark of much contemporary global justice theorizing (Sen, 2010) and why emancipatory global justice movements and forums, such as the WSF, promote secularism and public reason as essential to the pursuit of global justice (Conway, 2013).

Yet, secularism is not always as neutral as is claimed. What is deemed as universally 'reasonable' and 'rational' according to secular worldviews is arguably partial and culturally specific (Bretherton, 2010, p. 15; Eberle, 2002, pp. 313–314; Hurd, 2008). Certain forms of secularism can actively devalue, marginalize, and exclude worldviews that do not adhere to secular norms and standards (Mavelli & Petito, 2012, p. 931). Building on William Connolly's work, Daulatzai (2004) demonstrates how public discourses in global justice activism are crafted by secularist practices, excluding and marginalizing actors that do not comply with these dominant modes of subjectivity. Similarly, Conway (2013) highlights two key influences of secularism on global justice analysis and activism. Firstly, global justice actors have ignored the potential ways in which 'secular' modes of being are entangled with neoliberalism, the main focus of

global justice activism. This is not to ignore that ‘religious’ modes of being are also entangled with neoliberalism in certain contexts (Wilson & Steger, 2013), but the interconnections between secular ontologies and neoliberalism have received less attention from global justice actors than those between ‘religion’ and neoliberalism (Gifford, 1991, pp. 65–66 cited in Maxwell, 1998, p. 351; Wiegele, 2005). In privileging secular subjectivities, global justice actors may be unwittingly undermining their own goals of challenging dominant modes of power and agency in global politics. Secondly, and related, global justice actors have overlooked the contributions of ‘religious’ actors because of prevailing assumptions that ‘religion’ is incompatible with resistance movements, since these are associated with progressive politics, and ‘religion’ is often assumed to be highly conservative (Conway, 2013).

While wanting to draw out assumptions embedded in secularism that contribute to the subordination and marginalization of non-secular ontologies, it is important to acknowledge that a key part of the emergence of the secular and secularism was to address inequalities between different Christian theological perspectives in the European context (Casanova, 2011). In liberal democratic societies that are highly diverse regarding immanent and transcendent worldviews, secularism in its various guises attempts to manage relationships between competing worldviews in order to provide the best circumstances for the pursuit of the common good (Ager & Ager, 2011, p. 458). Nonetheless, it was an approach that developed to serve the needs of a specific cultural, political, and historical context that does not necessarily translate into other contexts. It may even undermine the global justice project, when used as the dominant framework through which to pursue justice across geo-political, economic, cultural, temporal, and ecological boundaries.

Articulating Ontological Injustice

The idea of ontological injustice remains largely under-developed in academic theorizing. The term has been applied in criminal psychology (Gray, 2007) and spatial sciences (Calvelli, 2011), but appears rarely in other social science and humanities literature. When it does (for example, Daly, 2000), it is often utilized without explanation. In developing a concept of ontological injustice, I draw on this existing literature, but especially Mario Blaser’s work on ‘political ontology’, as part of the recent so-called *ontological turn* in cultural anthropology (Blaser, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2013).

Addressing material injustice has been a principal focus of global justice. These efforts have centred around the acknowledgement of human rights—inequalities in resource distribution, access to basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, education, health care, political participation, economic independence and emancipation (see, for example, Beitz, 2010; O’Neill, 2010; Pogge, 2010; Sen, 2008; Singer, 2010). Within the GJM, cognitive or epistemological injustice has also become a major focus. Epistemological injustice, or what De Sousa Santos (2005, p. xviii) has more dramatically termed ‘epistemicide’, concerns the dominance of particular formations of knowledge over others. The way a culture/society/community formulates its knowledge is an intricate part of that culture’s identity and the way in which they make sense of the world (Bennett, 2007, p. 154). As such, the dominance of certain formations of knowledge over others contributes to the subordination and marginalization of certain cultures and communities.

Contesting epistemological injustice is arguably the central thrust of the GJM’s activism against the global dominance of neoliberalism. The catch cries of the WSF—‘Another World Is Possible’ and ‘There Are Many Alternatives’ (as opposed to Margaret Thatcher’s claim that ‘There Is No Alternative’)—are evidence of this commitment to address the dominance

of particular knowledge structures globally (see, for example, Bello, 1999; De Sousa Santos, 2014; George, 2004; Klein, 2000). Secularism's in-built self-justificatory logic, that it is neutral, at least as far as the value of different 'religions' are concerned, and universal, as opposed to 'religious', spiritual, and cosmological worldviews, which are subjective and culturally specific, has for a long time contributed to obscuring the relationship between secularism and epistemological injustice, although this is increasingly being highlighted by scholars in global justice theory and practice (Conway, 2013; Daulatzai, 2004; Smith & Smythe, 2017, this volume; Wilson, 2010, 2017).

The concept of ontological injustice seeks to push this critique a step further, however. Where epistemological injustice may be described as the exclusion of alternative views of the world, ontological injustice is concerned with the exclusion of views of alternative worlds (Viveiros de Castro, 2013). It is not simply that we must acknowledge that different people view the world differently, but rather that we must be open to the possibility that different people inhabit different worlds. It is not that we assume that there is a 'real', 'factual' world 'out there' that is simply interpreted differently (and incorrectly) by people who do not think 'like us', but rather that we consider the possibility that their world is in fact different (Blaser, 2013, pp. 552–553).

Furthermore, it is not just that the worlds are different, but that they are differently and unequally valued. This is a crucial contribution from political ontology, where 'politics' is understood as 'power differences' and 'ontology' is understood as the 'the power of difference' (Holbraad et al., 2014). Following this line of reasoning, ontological injustice is concerned with the power differences that exist amongst visions of different worlds in contemporary global politics, which begin in the subordination of particular realities to others and are entangled with and contribute to material and epistemological power differences. The dominance of secularism may then be argued to constitute an ontological injustice because it excludes or at the very least subordinates worlds where gods, spirits and ancestors, to name a few, are real actors with power, agency and influence that impact on daily life as well as societal and political institutions and structures. Similar to the way in which Daly (2000) has argued that, from a Marxist perspective, capitalism is an ontological injustice because it prevents people from becoming fully human by emphasizing their labour as the key aspect of their identity, secularism may be considered a form of ontological injustice because it attempts to privatize, minimize and exclude ways of understanding and living that do not conform to the assumptions of secular ontologies.

Venkatesan (2008, p. 154) provides a lucid explanation of the problem on which ontological injustice focuses: 'Ontologies, theories of being and reality, have histories (and genealogies). They are also not necessarily transcontextually stable.' Ontologies—which can be held by individuals, communities, groups, constituted along various lines of belonging—possess specific assumptions about what exists—what the world is, what human beings are, their fundamental characteristics, their relationship to one another, nature, the divine or supernatural (if it exists), and to themselves. Yet, these assumptions are contextually specific, and do not necessarily make sense from one context to another.

Blaser (2009) demonstrates the consequences of failing to recognize different ontologies and their theories about what exists. He recounts a conflict between the Yshiro Indigenous communities of Northern Paraguay, an EU-funded sustainable development project called Prodechaco and the Paraguay National Parks Direction. Yshiro leaders enquired about obtaining permits to hunt three animal species that at that time (1999) could only be hunted commercially. Prodechaco's directors supported the Yshiro leaders' request, with the proviso that the hunting be done sustainably. Prodechaco explained sustainable hunting thus: 'The animal population has to be

kept constant over the years. You hunt but make sure that there will always be enough animals for tomorrow' (quoted in Blaser, 2009, p. 10). Within two months, however, Prodechaco and the National Parks Direction asserted that the Yshiro had violated this agreed condition and were instead contributing to the devastation of the animal population. However, from their own perspective, the Yshiro had made sustainability a priority.

Blaser shows that this turn of events essentially arose from a difference in both epistemologies and ontologies. Not only was it the result of disparate understandings of how to achieve the sustainability of the animal population, an epistemological difference, it was also based on divergent understandings of what existed, an ontological difference. For the Yshiro, the territory they occupy is not just part of Paraguayan National Parks, but is the *yrmo*. The *yrmo* is governed by the principle of relationality, 'the mutual dependence of all that exists. Reciprocity between all entities that co-constitute it is fundamental to keep the flow of energy that sustains the *yrmo*' (Blaser, 2009, p. 13). In practical terms, the 'flow of energy' includes things such as the availability of food (including animals to hunt), possibilities for curing illnesses and other necessities for ensuring the community's well-being. If the system of reciprocity breaks down, shortages of food, disease, conflict and other social ills are the likely result. In the conflict over hunting, this meant that the benefits of receiving the hunting permits needed to be shared with a wide and ever-increasing network of reciprocity. This resulted in the violation of boundaries on hunting territories that had been imposed by the National Parks Direction and Prodechaco (Blaser, 2009: 16), culminating in the accusation of devastating the animal population. However, for the Yshiro, if the benefits were not shared amongst their networks of reciprocity, everyone would suffer and the animals would become scarcer. This sat fundamentally counter to the Prodechaco, for whom the *yrmo* and the significance of its networks of relationality and reciprocity did not exist and meant nothing, but who instead understood the relationship between humans and animals through scientific measurements of animal populations.²

The standard response to such a difference in ontologies is that the Yshiro ontology is just incorrect, or misguided. It is a 'traditional', 'pre-modern' understanding of the world that does not recognize the authority of scientific rationality to understand the reality in which we all live and exist. An alternative response is that what I describe here as an ontological difference is essentially an epistemological difference, because it is about interpreting 'reality', not about what that reality actually entails. In both responses, however, ontological injustice occurs, because the possibility that the *yrmo* actually exists is not considered.

Religious' and 'secular' approaches to the foundations for 'rational' enquiry provide another example more relevant for our purposes. For secular thinkers, rational enquiry must focus on things that can be observed and for which significant tangible 'scientific' evidence exists to support their existence. Thus, for example, secular rational enquiry cannot acknowledge God's existence because accepting the existence of God must, at some point, occur on the basis of faith.

From certain non-secular/religious/cosmological perspectives, however, acknowledging the existence of God or of a higher being is foundational for the search for truth. Both Pope John Paul II (1998) and Pope Benedict XVI (Zenit, 2007) articulated this view: any rational search for truth and reason must begin and end with God. The argument is based on the belief that God is omnipotent. Therefore, it is only through knowing God that humans can begin to understand and know themselves and the world they live in. Faith and reason are not mutually exclusive, but rather complement and complete one another (Zenit, 2007). Christian theologians have also long argued that God's existence is revealed through various aspects of 'general revelation'—the complexity of the natural world, the fact that individuals have a conscience—and

thus the existence of God can be logically derived from these phenomena (Berkouwer, 1959, pp. 14, 16; Erickson, 1998, pp. 177–223).³

In these diverging approaches, there are different understandings of what constitutes acceptable 'evidence', as well as what is an acceptable starting point for 'rational' enquiry. These are not simply different views of the world, but different worlds, one where the existence of God is the foundation of everything, and one where the existence of God is barely relevant, if at all. We may profoundly disagree with one or both of these views, but ontological justice requires that we take both seriously on their own terms and allow them to articulate their perspectives and arguments through their own language and frameworks (Viveiros de Castro, 2013). Failing to do this contributes to marginalization, inequality, and exclusion in contemporary global politics.

It is important to stress that I am not advocating a modified version of cultural relativism, or the reification of difference for the sake of difference. It is not a question of just 'believing' or accepting visions of alternative worlds, when they are fundamentally opposed to our own. I am not suggesting that Prodechaco has to abandon their scientific models and instead follow the Yshiro approach to sustainability based on reciprocity, nor that they just allow the Yshiro to proceed as they wish and stop engaging with them on the issue of sustainable hunting. The disagreement over whether God or the supernatural or spirits exist or not is an ongoing one, unlikely to ever be solved, and indeed resolving this disagreement is not the point. It is not a matter of simply accepting that some people believe and others do not, though this is important to acknowledge. To just accept or 'believe' the view of an alternative ontology, when it fundamentally contradicts what one 'knows' from the perspective of one's own ontology does not do justice to either viewpoint (Viveiros de Castro, 2013, pp. 494–495). What is at stake in the disagreement over the existence of God/gods/the spiritual and supernatural is not whether such things exist or not, but the different understandings of these things *and* of their relationship to human beings and the nature of human beings themselves that leads some people to believe that God does exist and others not (Viveiros de Castro, 2013, p. 495). It is these issues, and especially the different understandings of what human beings themselves are, which are crucial in discussions on global justice.

Secularism as Ontological Injustice

Building on this understanding of ontological injustice, this section argues that secularism's dominance, particularly in human rights (Freeman, 2004), aid and development (Ager & Ager, 2011), displacement and protection (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016), and global justice activism on poverty and alternatives to neoliberalism (Conway, 2013; Daulatzai, 2004) may be considered a form of ontological injustice. In each of these contexts, 'secular' ontologies are not only dominant over religious/spiritual/cosmological ontologies, but any encounters between the two are automatically interpreted through the lens of the secular.

Secular assumptions are deeply embedded within these global governance frameworks and are internalized and reproduced by actors that self-identify as 'religious' and as 'secular' alike (Barnet & Stein, 2012; Lynch, 2011). Ager and Ager (2011, p. 457) highlight that secular assumptions frame public discourses of humanitarianism, leading to a marginalization and privatization of religious beliefs, practices, actors and assumptions. These assumptions mean that those who express their needs in ways that do not follow the secular/religious binary are subordinated and marginalized in world politics. Furthermore, secularism's dominance privileges certain (neo-)liberal materialist assumptions (Ager & Ager, 2011, p. 457).

It is worth bearing in mind, though, that even actors who explicitly identify as ‘religious’ or ‘faith-based’ themselves reinforce the secular/religious binary (Asad, 2003).

I relate here observations from two employees of a faith-based development agency in Malawi to demonstrate my point. In 2014, a colleague and I conducted field research for a project on faith-based approaches to gender inequality and gender-based violence in development, including participant observation and individual and group semi-structured interviews. During this fieldwork, two interviewees independently referred to the marginalization of the religious and the spiritual in aid and development work. A community leader spoke of spirituality’s importance: ‘In our life there are several areas we need, one of them is spiritual, without that we cannot make it.’ A local programme manager voiced a similar observation: ‘As human beings we are soul, spirit and body, but we [development workers, the government] forget the spiritual and the soul. The spiritual influences how you think and act.’ Such a statement from an employee of a ‘religious’ development agency is revealing. It highlights how ‘secular’ development can be, to the point that self-identified ‘faith-based’ agencies themselves, where greater emphasis on the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of human existence may be expected, are to an extent complicit in privileging secular ontologies over non-secular ontologies within development. Non-secular ontologies become instrumentalized, a means to an end, rather than part of the fabric of a community. Furthermore, by explicitly identifying spirituality and religion, these two interviewees inadvertently reinforced the dominance of the secular/religious binary—‘religion’ is something that should be acknowledged and included, but it is still constructed as ‘something’, and something that is distinct and separate from other spheres of human activity.

The framework in which we were conducting the fieldwork provides additional insights. It was undertaken as part of a consultancy for a faith-based development agency seeking to develop a broader ‘evidence base’ for a programme utilizing explicitly religious narratives, scriptures, and teachings to promote gender equality and reduce gender-based violence. This evidence base of stories and statistics on individual and social transformation was being gathered in order to convince secular donor governments and agencies of the programme’s effectiveness and the ‘added value’ of ‘religion’. The agency’s internal perspectives on the programme’s effectiveness and the perspectives of the communities in which they were working were less relevant and important than what they knew would be convincing from a secular ontological perspective— independent evaluation, based on sound scientific methodologies, that almost entirely ignored ‘spiritual’ or metaphysical dimensions of such processes of change, such as prayer and worship, though these were highly significant for the agency and the communities.

This instrumentalization of ‘religion’ is representative of a deeper entanglement between secular and neoliberal worldviews. The relationship between neoliberal and secular assumptions has to date been under-explored, though their mutual foregrounding of rationalism and the material world suggests that this may be a fruitful avenue of enquiry for expanding our understanding of both (During, 2010; Mueller, 2011, pp. 379, 383). In the contemporary humanitarian sector, identities and practices of NGOs are shaped in part by (neo)liberal market policies and practices (Barnet & Stein, 2012; Lynch, 2011). As states increasingly outsource services to private contractors and civil society organizations, NGOs are required to conform to specific sets of market-based criteria in order to access funding, as well as catering their programmes to the desires of the state, thereby becoming part of the governance mechanisms of states and intergovernmental organizations (Barnet & Stein, 2012, p. 24; Lynch, 2011, pp. 213–214).

Yet, these processes can intrude on spirituality and are viewed by some self-identified ‘religious’ actors as secularization by other means (Ngo, 2015), contributing to processes

whereby cultures and their worlds are slowly marginalized and excluded partially because of the different way in which they formulate knowledge, as well as the different world that they seek to know (Bennett, 2007). While Barnett and Stein (2012, pp. 24–25) suggest that organizations may adopt secularization as a strategy, such as Islamic Relief following 9/11, the question arises to what extent agencies are *forced* to adopt secular modes of subjectivity as a survival strategy, resulting from the dominance of secular ontologies in humanitarianism.

Despite an increased interest in and willingness to engage with religious actors across the humanitarian sector in recent years, this engagement has primarily focused on the 'added value' that religious actors bring to pre-existing, predominantly secular and (Western) state-driven humanitarian aid and development programmes (Ager & Ager, 2011, p. 460). Rather than generating space for alternative ontologies, such practices run the risk of further embedding the assumptions of secularism. Faith-based actors are either increasingly defining themselves in 'secular' terms (Hopgood & Vinjamuri, 2012, p. 38) or defining themselves as 'religious' communities rather than a humanitarian organization to avoid having to 'professionalize/secularize', despite their primary activities being the provision of humanitarian aid and relief (Ngo, 2015).

Many of these tensions between secularism, neoliberalism, religion and justice in the humanitarian sector relate to tensions regarding human rights more generally. The historical antagonism between so-called *secular* conceptions of human rights and 'religious' approaches to these same rights continues to influence debates and practices today. 'Secular' approaches tend to assume that 'religions' must be reformed in order to 'fit' with global human rights standards enshrined in international law (Freeman, 2004). This is to a large extent because neutrality is held to be one of the most important values to ensure equal treatment and fair provision of services. Only secularism, so the argument goes, is capable of providing such neutrality (Freeman, 2004, p. 385).

However, this argument does not allow for the possibility that 'the appeal of religions such as Islam may be *precisely* that they seem to their adherents to protect human dignity *under modern conditions*, especially the modern condition of Western economic, political and cultural hegemony' (Freeman, 2004, p. 85). Leaving aside Freeman's potential homogenization of 'Islam', this 'Western' hegemony includes an emphasis on secularism as the most appropriate framework for promoting and protecting human dignity, again assuming that 'religion' will be a primary source of the disagreement over cooperation and action on human rights. This perspective ignores evidence from experiences with 'secular' political ideologies in the twentieth century that so-called *secular* worldviews can also generate exclusion, violence and oppression (Mavelli & Petito, 2012, p. 931).

'Religion' cannot easily be classified as either an obstacle or a conduit for the pursuit of justice and social transformation, since it is frequently entangled with both (Wilson & Steger, 2013). In any case, such efforts at classification are potentially futile, since it is not 'religions' that have agency to obstruct or promote justice, but people. Further, such classifications do little to challenge the dominance of secular ontologies, since it maintains the assumptions of the secular/religious binary – that 'religion' is something distinct and separate from the 'secular' and that 'religion' should be governed by the 'secular'. Thus, it is arguably more useful to move away from attempts to categorize 'religion' as 'good' or 'bad', 'progressive' or 'conservative' and instead seek to engage, deeply and continually, with the category of 'religion' and its various actors and dimensions in contextually sensitive ways.

Concurrently, it cannot be only 'religion' that we focus on in this manner, since this would replicate the hierarchical binary between the 'secular' and the 'religious'. The same approach should be adopted with the 'secular'. Both must be treated as categories whose meanings and

influences shift and change depending on context. The concern remains, though, that as long as we continue to use ‘secular’ and ‘religion’, it will be impossible to escape the associated epistemological and ontological inequalities that accompany this binary opposition. Similar to critiques of Habermasian postsecularism (Pabst, 2012), and of the postsecular approach in general (Birnbau, 2015), any framework that retains ‘religion’ and ‘secular’, even in the form of the ‘postsecular’, runs the risk of reinforcing the hierarchical divisions and inequalities that it is endeavouring to escape. As such, it is crucial to critically examine the ways secular ontologies in all their diversity contribute to ontological injustice and explore ways in which space can be created to acknowledge ontological difference in theory and practice.⁴

Multiple Ontologies, Multiple Realities and Global Justice Beyond ‘Religious’ and ‘Secular’

Taking views of other worlds seriously, particularly in cases such as the Yshiro people and the EU-funded sustainable development programme discussed earlier, represents what Blaser (2013, p. 548) has termed a ‘politico-conceptual problem’, particularly for those of us operating within the social sciences and humanities, governed as they are by accepted norms of secular, scientific reasoning, logic and forms of evidence. It requires that we suspend the modern assumption that there is ‘one world’ out there that can be known and discovered through objective, neutral methods and theorizing. It further requires that we do not attempt to relate different ontologies to one another through language and concepts that belong to only one of them. Nonetheless, cross-ontological communication is critical to ontological justice. We must therefore be careful to avoid simply arguing for cultural relativism—‘that’s just what they believe’—since this in part forecloses any attempt at cross-ontological communication and compounds ontological injustice by implying that a different ontology is not worth engaging with and trying to understand. How then are we to engage and communicate across different ontologies, to overcome ontological injustice and to understand that different material and epistemological injustice may exist across different ontologies? What does this mean for developing collaborative responses to global problems such as displacement, poverty, and climate change, for example?

I cannot hope to offer anything like a definitive solution for this politico-conceptual problem here. In fact, I argue that we should not seek a definitive solution. Similar to conceptualizations of ‘justice’ and ‘religion’ in my previous work (Wilson, 2010, 2012), I suggest here that continual relationality and dialogue are more satisfactory approaches for dealing with ontological injustice than efforts at translation and interpretation. By this, I mean that relationality and dialogue are collaborative efforts and must be undertaken in contexts of equality with attitudes of mutual humility and learning (Kristeva, 1986; Prokhovnik, 2003), rather than translation and interpretation, which can only be done through the imposition of categories and frames from one ontology onto another. This is consistent with Venkatesan’s (2008, p. 154) argument in favour of a multiple realities and multiple ontologies approach, which has the potential to ‘generate new concepts that go beyond those that come from “our” ontology’.

Nonetheless, is it possible that there might be certain categories, principles, objects, or referents that we could focus on to begin with in an attempt to build a multiple ontologies analytical framework, recognizing all the while that these categories and referents will be imperfect? Are there signifiers or values that we could focus on to develop this approach beyond the abstract and theoretical and to get away from *a priori* assumptions that the world is divided into actors who are ‘secular’ and ‘religious’? Indeed, in practices on the ground, such categories may already be emerging. Cooperation amongst organizations on economic justice across the religious/secular

divide that Smith and Smythe (2017) describe is an example. Scholars have observed similar partnerships in development (Bartelink, 2016) and forced migration (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016). In these contexts, categories and values such as 'dignity', 'solidarity', 'mutual respect', 'sharing', and 'cooperation' are more important for actors and organizations than 'religious' or 'secular' markers of identity.

At the most foundational level, the development of a multiple ontologies approach requires a commitment to contextual embeddedness. Accepting that there are multiple ontologies and multiple worlds and that 'secular' and 'religious' are not universal almost automatically precludes generalizations and grand narratives. Different views of the world and views of different worlds must be researched in their historical, cultural, political, geographic, and economic contexts. This argument fits with communitarian theories of global justice, yet, reflecting emerging practices on the ground, I would argue for a hybrid 'cosmopolitan communitarianism'—a universal commitment to understanding and valuing different ontologies equally. It is well established that secularism emerged in a particular historical, political, and cultural context and is thus highly specific, not universally applicable as previously assumed (Casanova, 2011; Cavanaugh, 2009; Eberle, 2002; Hurd, 2008; Mavelli, 2012; Wilson, 2012). This is an important insight for the development of cooperative policy initiatives on human rights, aid and development, migration, climate change, conflict, and peacebuilding, and for global justice theorists and practitioners. To not undermine their own efforts to address material and epistemological injustices, global justice actors must not privilege secular political frameworks.

Second, the secular/religious division automatically creates the impression that 'religion' is something special, unique, or different from other realms and factors within human society. This sense of difference, I suggest, in part contributes to a feeling of weariness and frustration expressed by some policy-makers in relation to dealing with 'religion'. What is important is to find ways to speak about 'religion', 'religious' actors, and 'religious' organizations that remove this sense of otherness, while at the same time not downplaying the importance of spiritual, transcendent, and supernatural dimensions of their worldviews that are largely absent from so-called secular worldviews. One way of doing this would be to instead consider broad cross-cutting categories related to how different actors, whether secular, religious, political, social or otherwise, understand the world and consider the best ways for collective life to be organized. These might include, for example: history and time (what are the important historical events/markers for these different actors? How does that affect their view of priorities into the future?); political and societal organization (What are the rules, values, and principles by which they think collective life together should be organized? How significant is the state, the government, institutions, local societal, and traditional leaders, in the authority structures these actors deem necessary for community?); resources and land (how does this actor or group of actors understand the significance/purpose of land? How is the natural world viewed within the community? As a commodity? As collective or individual property? As sacred? As an influential and powerful agent?); power and authority (what is power within this ontology? What are the main sources of power? What is leadership and how is it defined and constituted?). Scott (2013) has posited 'wonder' as an alternative analytical category that does not carry with it the same conceptual restrictions as 'religious' and 'secular'. Related terms such as 'awe' may also offer possibilities here.

Third, rather than emphasizing the importance of 'translating' and 'interpreting' from one ontology to another, a more equitable approach may be for global justice theorists and practitioners to become 'multilingual' in different ontologies. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to translate the exact meaning of a word from one language to another. Only as a speaker

becomes fluent in both languages do they understand the subtleties, nuances, and differences amongst them. The same principle may operate for different ontologies. Scholars in development and humanitarianism note how religious actors are ‘fluent’ in both secular and religious vernacular, able to communicate with wide varieties of audiences, yet the same is rarely true of secular actors (Ager & Ager, 2011). In part, this may be attributed to the supremacy of secular ontologies over religious ones. Secular ontologies dominate global public institutions and global civil society. Everyone is forced to be fluent in secular thinking and secular language; therefore, there is no need for secular actors to develop fluency in other ontologies. Yet, in the pursuit of material, epistemological, and ontological justice, I suggest that all actors and organizations should be fluent in multiple ontologies, able to communicate in a variety of different ontological frames, even if they do not necessarily agree with or ‘believe’ every premise of those ontologies.⁵

The above list does not offer anything like a clearly articulated alternative to current approaches to the problem of secularism’s dominance in global politics. It is, rather, a starting point that attempts to move beyond critique and deconstruction.

Conclusion

I have argued that secularism’s dominance in global justice theory and practice (and global politics more generally) constitutes a form of ontological injustice. Ontological justice is entangled with other concerns of global justice, including material and epistemological justice, but to date has been under-theorized. Conceptualizing secularism’s dominance as a form of ontological injustice enables recognition of the ways in which secularism infringes on the capacity of certain individuals and communities to fully experience the human (Daly, 2000), as well as its contribution to the marginalization and subordination of certain ‘views of alternative worlds’.

I am not (yet) suggesting that we should abandon ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ as analytical categories. Indeed, while these words retain traction and are commonly used in policy and society, it is crucial that scholars continue to critically examine how these categories are defined and deployed, and the power relations, inequalities, and exclusions that they contribute to constructing (Asad, 2003; Hurd, 2015; Mahmood, 2016). Such analysis is an important part of deconstructing the deeply embedded assumptions about the a priori nature of ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ as objects and ways of being in the world.

At the same time, however, unless we seek to develop alternatives to secular ontologies as ways of defining, understanding, and responding to the world, the inequalities and power imbalances that such frameworks produce will remain. Deconstruction is only one part of the process. It is for this reason that alternative analytical and conceptual frameworks that move completely away from ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ must at least be considered. A multiple ontologies/multiple realities approach, while still in the early stages of articulation and development, offers one possibility for such alternative analytical and conceptual frameworks.

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Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Kim Knibbe for her suggestions on how to phrase this particular point.
- 2 See also Viveiros de Castro (2013), for another example of ontological conflict and injustice, discussing different understandings of bodies amongst Western missionaries and Piro people in Peru.
- 3 See also Latour's (2010) essay on fetishes and 'factishes', highlighting similarities between the construction of both, yet while fetish-worshippers are aware that fetishes are human-made, 'facts' have taken on a new universal, 'other-worldly' quality in the modern ontology.
- 4 My thanks again to Kim Knibbe for her assistance in articulating this point.
- 5 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer who pointed out the bilingual nature of religious actors and invited me to reflect further on this point in this section.

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Erin K. Wilson is Director of the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen. Her research explores 'religious' and 'secular' dynamics in global justice, human rights, migration, gender and development. Her publications include *After secularism* (2012) and *The refugee crisis and religion* (2016, co-edited with Luca Mavelli), and articles in *International Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Politics Religion Ideology* and *Global Society*.